



Federal Update for January 5 – 9, 2015



War Costs Since 911 ► Dollar and Human

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and counterterrorism operations have cost the U.S. a combined \$1.6 trillion since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, according to a new Congressional Research Service analysis. Refer to <http://media.bloomberg.com/bb/avfile/rU4ypR8jD54M> to view the complete Congressional Research.

Service report:

Dollar Cost - Through fiscal 2014, which ended in September, Congress approved \$815 billion for warfare in Iraq, \$686 billion for Afghanistan and other operations against terrorism, \$81 billion for other war designated spending and \$27 billion for Operation Noble Eagle air patrols over the U.S., according to the report posted on the agency's internal website. The total includes \$297 billion spent on weapon procurement and war repairs. The assessment is the agency's first full update of war costs since March 2011. About 92 percent of the funds went to the Pentagon, followed by the State Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs. It includes war operations, training and equipping Iraqi and Afghan forces, diplomatic operations and medical care for wounded Americans over the past 13 years, the agency said in the report dated Dec. 8.

It also includes most reconstructions costs. "The main factor determining cost is the number of U.S. troops deployed" at different times, the research service said. U.S. troops in Afghanistan peaked at 100,000 in 2011; there are 11,600 there today as the U.S. withdrawal continues. The figures include war-related intelligence funding that wasn't tracked or spent by the Defense Department, according to the report. It wasn't updated with the \$63.7 billion in war spending for the current fiscal year for Afghanistan operations and the first installment of operations against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

Human Costs - The Iraq invasion -- initiated on a pledge to rid Saddam Hussein of weapons of mass destruction he didn't have -- resulted in 4,491 U.S. military and civilian deaths and 32,244 wounded, according to Defense Department data compiled by Bloomberg. The U.S. invasion to destroy al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and remove the Taliban from power has led to 2,356 military and U.S. civilians deaths and 20,060 wounded as of 16 DEC 2014. In addition, 128,496 U.S. military who deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, according to September data from the Defense Medical Surveillance System.

Cost Caveats - Unlike academic estimates, which have calculated total costs as much higher, the Congressional Research Service doesn't include in its calculations the lifetime costs of medical care for disabled veterans, imputed interest on the deficit or potential increases to the base defense budget deemed to be a consequence of the war, according to Amy Belasco, author of the report. "Such costs are difficult to compute, subject to extensive caveats and often based on methodologies that may not be appropriate," she wrote. A June cost-of-war assessment by Neta Crawford, a political science professor at Boston University, put the potential total cost of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and assistance to Pakistan since 2001 at \$4.4 trillion, including \$316 billion in interest costs and \$1 trillion through 2054 for veterans care. [Source: Bloomberg News | Tony Capaccio | Dec. 19, 2014 ++]

Budget Deficit Reduction Update ► Brainstorming Health Care Budget

The Defense Department could slash its enormous health care budget by requiring Tricare beneficiaries not on active duty to get health care coverage through Affordable Care Act exchanges, according to several current and former congressional budget experts. In the past several budget cycles, the Pentagon has sought to reduce its \$52 billion health budget by asking Congress to approve cost-savings measures that include increased Tricare fees for retirees, fees for Tricare For Life beneficiaries and cost-shares for active-duty families. Some proposals, such as reducing prescription costs by promoting use of military and mail-order pharmacies, have been implemented, but for the most part, Congress has resisted changes to the status quo for those who use the military health system and its private health care network.

But, the budget analysts said, the Defense Department could realize tremendous savings if it tapped into the resources offered by the general, civilian health care system and coverage available through federal or state exchanges. "It's a little radical, but should we be thinking about how some of the military system might transition some of their people to the Affordable Care Act exchanges, especially in sparsely populated areas of the country?" said Alice Rivlin, former director of the Congressional Budget Office and the Office of Management and Budget who now serves as a senior fellow in economic studies at the Brookings Institution. "The case for the special supply of [health] services is strong for the active duty. For the families ... the case for having a dedicated supply system is much weaker. That suggests the possible appeal of the option Alice mentioned, which is to help them have fair, well-financed access to the general health care system," said Henry Aaron, also a senior fellow at Brookings who once served as assistant secretary for planning and evaluation at the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

The military health system budget funds military hospitals and clinics, a medical school, research, medical support for military operations and health care for 9.6 billion beneficiaries, including about 1.3 million active duty service members. The Congressional Budget Office issued a report in January 2013 noting that the increases in the military health budget — a 130 percent increase since 2000 to the current \$52 billion cost — largely are attributable to the introduction of the Tricare For Life benefit, which supports Medicare-eligible military retirees and their families and the increased draw of Tricare Prime for military retirees and their families. Currently, active-duty family members on Tricare Prime — the military's health maintenance organization-style program — pay no annual enrollment fees and no cost-shares to see a physician. Retirees pay \$555.84 a year to enroll themselves and their families in Tricare Prime and pay fees ranging from \$12 to 20 percent of a bill depending on the care received.

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs Dr. Jonathan Woodson said Tricare beneficiaries now pay about 9 percent of their total health care bill out-of-pocket, down from 27 percent in 1994 when Tricare was introduced. In an effort to save money, the military services have launched efforts to draw Tricare beneficiaries back to military treatment facilities rather than use private-sector care, which costs the Defense Department significantly more money to provide.

Speaking at a forum on health care reform, compensation policy and the DoD health budget sponsored by the Brookings Institution, the analysts said they recognize that the Pentagon has a responsibility to provide health care coverage to the troops and, as a matter of recruitment and retention, offer a robust health benefit to their family members. "The DoD has got to maintain a strong compensation program to attract the people it needs and probably, we would all agree, a generous one to recognize the service of the men and women in uniform, because it's been very taxing and continues to be," said former Pentagon comptroller Robert Hale.

But, several panelists added, the military itself doesn't necessarily have to be the institution providing at least the health care for its nonmilitary dependents and retirees. And, John Mayer, a military health and energy analyst with Booz Allen Hamilton, added the Pentagon should be under no obligation to continue providing "free health" care to those who have retired from military service and have access to health care either through their employers or the Affordable Care Act. "Having a program where they can go in and get free health care, and do it as often as they want seems to be a burden that the American public shouldn't have to bear," Mayer said, speaking of the military retiree population who uses Tricare. The growing cost of health care is a longtime concern for the Pentagon and is one of the benefits being reviewed by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, an independent panel commissioned by Congress to review military pay and benefits, to include housing, health care and retirement packages.

This year, Congress again rejected Pentagon proposals to change Tricare included in the White House budget, saying any significant changes should come after the commission releases its report, expected in February. A change as significant as booting all civilian Tricare beneficiaries to private health insurance likely would meet strong resistance by Congress. Members of the military service organizations present at the Brookings forum said they are waiting for the outcome of the commission review and called the dialogue "interesting." "I think there were some excellent people on this panel ... with some nuggets to think about, especially when it comes to working on things together, between the military health system and the civilian health delivery system, working on commonalities where it makes sense. But some of this stuff ... I just think some of

them really don't understand the military health system," said retired Navy Capt. Kathy Beasley of the Military Officers Association of America.

Recognizing that some of the ideas discussed during the forum, especially regarding the Affordable Care Act, would generate concern among Tricare beneficiaries, moderator Michael O'Hanlon, also a senior fellow with Brookings, said the discussion was a "brainstorming session" and not reflective of any DoD intentions. "Framing the discussion today, as you are aware, we've got an active assistant secretary, we've got a former comptroller and other people who are brainstorming, so you are hearing different ideas in different veins and I just want to underscore that point," O'Hanlon said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | Dec. 19, 2014++]

Other than Honorable Discharge Update ► DoD to Investigate Use

The amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act mandates an investigation of whether the military has improperly used other than honorable discharges to rid the services of wounded troops who commit minor offenses. The amendment, written by U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet (D-CO) follows a Pulitzer Prize-winning 2013 Gazette investigation that found the Army used disciplinary discharges to part with soldiers who were later denied health care benefits that might help them recover from combat wounds and mental illness. "We have heard from veterans in Colorado who believe that some service members are receiving less than honorable discharges for behavior that could be related to mental trauma from combat," Bennet said 15 DEC in a statement. "Clearly, we can't have a system that punishes service members for injuries sustained in service and this bill will help us understand whether this is happening and what we need to do to change it."

Under the measure, the Government Accountability Office will investigate the discharges. Specifically, the report will show whether the military unfairly discharges troops for minor misconduct. It will also examine whether officers are trained to balance misconduct against war-caused mental illness and other factors. Other areas of inquiry include how often misconduct discharges can be related to troops with posttraumatic stress and whether troops are counseled on veterans benefits before agreeing to a dishonorable discharge. Bennet said the

questions came up in veterans panels after The Gazette's investigation. "Other than Honorable" showed that an increasing number of soldiers, including wounded combat veterans, were being kicked out of the service for misconduct, often with no benefits, as the Army downsizes after more than a decade of war.

In May 2013, The Gazette published the series in print and on gazette.com. It used Army data to show that the number of soldiers being discharged for misconduct annually had surged to its highest level since 2009 at posts with the most combat troops. The investigation found that several factors were related to the discharges, including a mandatory troop reduction; an overwhelmed medical discharge process; and policies that didn't account for behavior resulting from the mental wounds of war. [Source: The Gazette | Tom Roeder | Dec. 16, 2014 ++]

PTSD Punitive Discharges ► Upgrade Website Launched

A special web page has been launched to assist veterans seeking to upgrade punitive discharges related to behavior problems caused by post-traumatic stress. The web page provides information and applications to seek an upgrade to discharge from service. The page can be found at <http://arba.army.pentagon.mil/adrbptsd.cfm>. It follows a recent directive to the Army's Review Boards Agency to give liberal consideration to requests for discharge upgrades from veterans who say they were kicked out of service because of problems related to PTSD. Thousands of Vietnam-era soldiers may have been given punitive discharges because they suffered from PTSD before it was recognized as a debilitating medical condition, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel acknowledged in September.

The ARBA is the Army's highest level of administrative review for personnel actions taken by lower level organizations, and is comprised of several boards for considering the claims of soldiers and former soldiers who appeal unfavorable information in their personnel records. Discharge upgrades are important because they are linked to benefits available through Veterans Affairs, such as treating PTSD-related symptoms, according to information provided by the Army. The Army could not provide an estimate of how many applications it will receive as a result of the outreach campaign. However, a class action suit brought by veterans groups, including the Vietnam Veterans of America, estimates that one

third of the 250,000 other than-honorable discharges issued to Vietnam-era veterans may have been PTSD-related. Veterans who previously were denied an upgrade can re-apply under the new guidance, and the Army Board for Correction of Military Records will consider the application a new case, according to the Army.

The new guidance only applies to veterans who received "other than honorable" discharges. It does not apply to veterans who received less than honorable or dishonorable discharges because of serious infractions. Components of the Review Boards Agency include the Army Board for Correction of Military Records, the Army Discharge Review Board and the Army Grade Determination Review Board. [Source: ArmyTimes Dec. 17, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Update ► Reform Cuts Key JPAC Personnel

A program that provides dozens of scientists and other experts to the Hawaii-based Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command is being sharply cut. The move comes at the same time that Congress is seeking more recoveries and identifications from JPAC, whose headquarters and main lab are at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported. As part of a Pentagon reorganization effort, 50 Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education fellows who assist JPAC are being let go. JPAC is responsible for finding, recovering and identifying missing-in-action service members. The Pentagon says only a half-dozen current or new Oak Ridge fellows will be retained.

A careful review on how the program is used is required for "prudent use of government resources," Pentagon spokeswoman Navy Cmdr. Amy Derrick-Frost said in an email. "There has been no decision to eliminate or keep ORISE as the single fellowship source," she said. "We continue to explore a number of options to meet valid requirements, and any decision will be based on the government's requirements." Carrie Brown is an Oak Ridge research fellow at JPAC's satellite lab at Offutt Air Force Base in Nebraska. Brown, who moved to Nebraska with her husband for the job, said she was given about a month's notice that her contract would not be renewed 1 DEC. "We've been constantly told, 'The decision hasn't been made, the decision hasn't been made,' "about keeping the fellows, Brown

said. "They are destroying a world-class workforce when their message is they want to retain a world-class workforce." [Source: Associated Press | Dec. 28, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,539) Korean War (7,685), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,638), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for.

For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo> or call or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam – none

Korea

The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 8 DEC that the remains of a U.S. soldier, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Pfc. Anthony R. La Rossa, 18, of Brooklyn, N.Y., will be buried Dec. 15, 2014, in Farmingdale, N.Y. On Feb. 11, 1951, La Rossa was assigned to Company L, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, as part of Support Force 21. They were deployed near Changbongni, South Korea, when their defensive line was attacked by Chinese forces, forcing the unit to withdraw south to a more defensible position. La Rossa was reported as missing inaction Feb. 13, 1951. Reports received after the battle indicated that La Rossa had been captured by Chinese forces and died while in captivity, but these were not substantiated by any eyewitness accounts of American POWs who returned. His remains were not

among those returned by communist forces after the Armistice in 1953, or in Operation Glory in 1954. When no information regarding La Rossa was received, a military review board declared him presumed dead and his remains unrecoverable. Between 1991 and 1994, North Korea turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over with some of the boxes, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where La Rossa was believed to have died. To identify La Rossa's remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, to include mitochondrial DNA, which matched his brother.

The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 29 DEC that the remains of a U.S. soldier, unaccounted for from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Sgt.1st Class Gordon L. Hannah, 27, of Grand Rapids, Minn., will be buried Jan. 7, 2015, in Fort Snelling, Minn. On Jan. 28, 1951, Hannah was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division (ID), which was engaged in a battle against enemy forces in the vicinity of Wonju, Republic of South Korea. Hannah was reported missing in action after the battle. In late 1953, as part of a prisoner of war exchange, known as "Operation Big Switch," returning U.S. soldiers told debriefers that Hannah was captured Jan. 28, 1951, by enemy forces and died from dysentery in early 1951 at Suan Bean Camp. His remains were not among those turned over to the U.S. by communist forces after the Armistice. Between 1991 and 1994, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K) turned over to the U.S. 208 boxes of human remains believed to contain more than 400 U.S. servicemen who fought during the war. North Korean documents, turned over at that time, indicated that some of the remains were recovered from the vicinity where Hannah was believed to have died. In addition, in late 2000, a joint U.S./D.P.R.K. team excavated a purported burial site near Kujang, North Korea, where they recovered commingled human remains. Hannah's remains were recovered during these two field activities. To identify Hannah scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, dental and radiograph comparison, and forensic identification tools, to include

two forms of DNA analysis mitochondrial DNA, which matched his niece and nephew and Y-STR DNA, which matched his son.

Other Korean War MIAs Identified: The Defense POW/MIA Office announced the identification of remains of three soldiers who had been missing-in-action since the Korean War. Recovered were:

- Cpl. Francis D. Knobel, U.S. Army, Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, was lost Dec. 12, 1950, in North Korea. He was accounted for Dec. 10, 2014. He will be buried with full military honors.
- Army Pfc. Anthony Massey Jr., 23, of Graves County, Ky., was lost in North Korea on Nov. 28, 1950, and later died as a prisoner of war. He was accounted for on Dec. 5, 2014. He was assigned to Company C, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, and will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.
- Army Cpl. Donald A. Therkelsen, 23, of Cook, Ill., was lost in North Korea on July 17, 1953, and accounted for on Dec. 2, 2014. He was assigned to Medical Company, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, and will be buried with full military honors on a date and location yet to be determined.

World War II

The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office announced 29 DEC that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, lost during World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Air Forces Maj. Peyton S. Mathis, Jr., 28, of Montgomery, Ala., will be buried Jan. 3, 2015, in his hometown. On June 5, 1944, Mathis was the pilot of a P-38J Lightning on a bombing mission on Japanese gun positions in the Shortland-Poporang area of the northern Solomons Islands. En route Mathis lost power in his right engine. At approximately the same time the mission was canceled. Mathis crashed while attempting to land at Kukum Air Field on Guadalcanal Island in the Solomon Islands. A rescue team located the crash site the same day, but was unable to recover Mathis because the aircraft was submerged in water in a dense jungle swamp. In 1949, an Army Graves Registration Company searched for Mathis' P-38J, but was unable to locate it. He was subsequently declared non-recoverable. In 2012, while surveying another crash site, Joint POW/MIA

Accounting Command (JPAC) was led by local individuals to another crash site. JPAC surveyed the area and in 2013 JPAC excavated the site. While there in 2013 the team took possession of additional remains that were in custody of the local police department. These additional remains were reported as being found by local villagers prior to the team's arrival to excavate the site. To identify Mathis' remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, to include dental comparisons and mitochondrial DNA, which matched Mathis' maternal-line cousin. [Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Dec. 30, 2014 ++]

VA Women Vet Programs Update ► CWV/ CAWP MOU

The Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) Center for Women Veterans (CWV) entered into a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with the Center for American Women and Politics (CAWP), a unit of the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, to increase women veterans' leadership and career opportunities, which will benefit the Nation's workforce and address women veterans' needs. The MoA will allow the CWV and CAWP to leverage existing resources and increase coordination of activities to help women veterans develop public service and community engagement skill sets, so they will be prepared for public and community opportunities.

"Women veterans often contact us for information about how they can continue serving," said Elisa M. Basnight, director of the CWV. The Center, created in 1994 to monitor VA's administration of benefits and services to women veterans and to advise the Secretary on VA policy's impact on women veterans, can provide advice to CAWPs on how it focuses its resource information to address women veterans' issues.

CAWP is a source of scholarly research and current data about American women's political participation. Its mission is to promote greater knowledge and understanding about women's participation in politics and government and to enhance women's influence and leadership in public life. "The Center for American Women and Politics is delighted to collaborate with the Center for

Women Veterans to provide more information and resources for women veterans who want to engage more fully in their communities.

Women who have already put their country first by serving in the military are exactly the people we need as public leaders,” said Debbie Walsh, director of the CWAP. Women veterans represent one of the fastest growing segments of the veteran population — about 10 percent of the total 22 million veterans in this country. Today there are an estimated 2.2 million female veterans. The CWP participates in collaborative initiatives with Federal/state/local governmental and non-governmental stakeholders, to improve opportunities for women veterans. Visit <http://www.va.gov/womenvet> for more information about women veterans. [Source: Shift Colors | Vol 60 Issue 3 | Winter 2014 ++]

Homeless Vets Update ► IG Report on VA’s Homeless Hotline

The Department of Veterans Affairs is facing renewed criticism over its inability to properly meet the needs of former service members – this time over the poor operation of the call center established to aid homeless vets (VA help line 1-877-4AID-VET). A recent inspector general’s report revealed that homeless and at-risk veterans who contacted the call center, which costs \$3 million a year to operate, often experienced problems either getting in touch with counselors or receiving the necessary referrals for services. Of the estimated 79,500 homeless veterans who contacted the hotline in fiscal year 2013, the report determined that the only thing 27 percent of those contacting the hotline could do is leave a message on an answering machine because counselors were unavailable to take calls. About 16 percent of the callers could not receive a necessary referral to VA medical facilities because the calls left on the answering machine were either inaudible or failed to provide contact information. And 4 percent failed to receive a referral to VA medical facilities despite having provided all necessary information. The department fell short in about 40,500 incidences, according to the report.

Lisa Pape, executive director for homeless programs at the Veterans Health Administration, told members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee reviewing the homeless problem that she regrets “that any veteran calling for referrals did not get the service they requested.” The agency is implementing measures intended to address the problem, she said, adding that “management is looking at

how to address issues in performance.” The department already has rescheduled employee hours to ensure that phones are staffed at peak times. About 90 percent of incoming calls are now being directly answered. Those whose calls are answered mechanically are informed of where they stand in the queue and offered the option of remaining on the line or leaving a message. The inspector general’s report said that in many instances it could not account for a significant amount of the time of the counselors who were supposed to be manning the call center, which counts 60 employees.

Pape suggested they may have either been attending training sessions, on leave or filing paperwork in regard to earlier contacts. Lawmakers attending the committee meeting chided the department for its failings. “The OIG report is embarrassing to our nation’s brave men and women,” said Rep. Jackie Walorski (R-IN). “Almost 50,000 veterans experience homelessness on any given night and yet we can’t even help the ones who reach out for help. This is another example of the persistent lack of accountability at the VA and cannot continue.” The call center, Walorski said, is “failing our nation’s finest.”

On the positive side, the department declared that the problem of veteran homelessness is declining — veteran homelessness has dropped 33 percent since 2009, although plenty of cases remain unresolved. Precise counts are impossible to achieve because of the homeless population’s transient nature. But the Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates 49,933 veterans are homeless on any given night. Over the course of a year, about twice that number may experience homelessness. Only 7 percent of the nation’s general population are service veterans but they account for almost 13 percent of the homeless. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans maintains that in addition to the usual reasons for homelessness — a nationwide shortage of affordable housing, the lack of income and access to healthcare — a large number of displaced and at-risk veterans face additional challenges like the lingering effects of posttraumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, factors compounded by a lack of family and social support networks. Also, military occupations and training are not always transferable to the civilian workforce, placing some veterans at a disadvantage when competing for employment. A top priority for homeless veterans, according to the coalition, is secure, safe, clean housing that offers a supportive environment free of drugs and alcohol. [Source: PJ Media Daily Digest | Bill Straub | Dec. 15, 2014 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure ~ Lejeune Update ► Exposure Dates Expanded

A law signed in DEC expanded the eligibility for family members affected by the historic water contamination on Camp Lejeune, according to the VA. Under the amendment, family members who lived on Camp Lejeune for 30 days or more between Aug. 1, 1953, and Dec. 31, 1987, could be eligible for VA health benefits. The initial dates before the change were between Jan. 1, 1957, and Dec. 31, 1987. Family members who apply through the program for health benefits could receive out-of-pocket medical expenses reimbursed by the VA. The VA would be able to cover expenses related to one of 15 medical conditions: including esophageal cancer, breast cancer, kidney cancer, multiple myeloma, renal toxicity, female infertility, scleroderma, Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, lung cancer, bladder cancer, leukemia, Myelodysplastic syndromes, hepatic steatosis, miscarriage and neurobehavioral effects. Family members would have to show proof of relationship to a veteran who served at Camp Lejeune and provide copies of orders or base housing records as proof of residence on the installation. To enroll online or for more information, call 1-866-372-1144 or visit publichealth.va.gov/exposures/camp-lejeune. [Source: Jacksonville NC Daily News Dec. 19, 2014 ++]

Vet Suicide Update ► H.R. 5059 Passage Halted by Sen. Tom Coburn

Supporters of a sweeping veterans suicide prevention bill suffered a major setback 15 DEC when retiring Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) blocked the measure in the waning hours of the year's legislative session. The move meant the end of the effort for 2014 and potentially months of rebuilding work in 2015 for advocates who championed the bill as a critical step forward in veterans mental health care. "This legislation is already long overdue," said Bonnie Carroll, president of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. "The price we've already paid in lives waiting for this bill is already too high."

The Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention act, named for a Marine veteran activist who took his own life in 2011, would create new peer support programs for troubled veterans, mandate new online mental health resources, repay student loans for

psychiatrists willing to work at Veterans Affairs facilities, and evaluate existing suicide prevention programs to insure their effectiveness. Veterans groups have touted the measure as a key step forward in veterans mental health care, and blasted the delay in its passage as potentially costing lives.

House lawmakers easily approved the measure in mid-DEC, but Coburn blocked quick passage in the Senate over concerns about costs and program redundancy. The measure costs \$22 million over five years. Supporters have said VA can absorb those costs within existing budget parameters, creating no new funding need. But Coburn disputed that, saying at best the new effort will drain funds from existing programs.

In an emotional, defensive floor speech the night of 15 DEC, Coburn said the measure "throws money and doesn't solve the real problem" of holding VA officials accountable to provide better programs and better oversight of department funds. But Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-CT) — who forced Coburn to publicly object to the bill by bringing it up on the Senate floor — and officials from veterans groups angrily blasted those charges, saying the bill's price tag is "infinitely minuscule" compared with billion-dollar budget bills routinely before Congress and the cost of losing Americans who served their country. "It is clear that something needs to be done," said Alex Nicholson, legislative director for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "It is dangerous and dishonorable for one single senator to simply complain about and block efforts to combat the veteran suicide crisis without having offered any alternative solutions of his own."

The bill had also drawn support from VA Secretary Bob McDonald, who called it an important step forward towards "improving mental health care for our nation's veterans." Just hours before Monday's objection, he implored the Senate to pass the measure. With Congress just a few days from adjourning for the year, the legislative defeat means supporters will have to reintroduce and rebuild momentum for the measure next year. Veterans groups have vowed to do just that, but noted the delay will deprive many struggling veterans the help they need right now. About 22 veterans a day take their own lives, according to VA statistics.

On a brighter side is that the Jacob Sexton Military Suicide Prevention Act of 2014 (S.2300) introduced by Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-IN) and Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS)

passed. It provides annual mental health assessments to every member of the military. Currently, such assessments are mostly for those who have deployed, but will be expanded to include all military members. Sexton killed himself in a movie theater in Muncie, Ind., while home on leave from Afghanistan. The details of S.2300 can be seen at <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/s2300/text>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Dec. 15, 2014++]

Vet Legislative Wins 2014 ► Few But 2 Big Ones

Veterans faced a disheartening series of nationwide scandals related to their benefits and care in 2014, but that also brought an encouraging boost in attention and action from Capitol Hill. Advocates from the veterans community saw two of their top legislative priorities approved in the waning days of the lame-duck congressional session: a new, bigger Veterans Affairs Department budget and advance appropriations for all VA benefits starting next fiscal year. Those successes come after this summer's massive veterans' reform bill that mandated more private care options for veterans facing lengthy wait times for VA medical appointments and more money to hire doctors, lease space, and find ways to add more care hours for patients.

And 2014 began with veterans advocates succeeding in killing their most hated legislative provision of 2013 — a plan to lower cost-of-living adjustments on military retirees, part of a broader budget balancing package. "We feel pretty good about what we accomplished," said Garry Augustine, executive director of Disabled American Veterans. "Getting anything done in Washington is a surprise these days. And those were big accomplishments." DAV had been leading the push for advance appropriations since the 2013 government shutdown, when veterans' GI Bill checks and other benefits were threatened due to a lack of authorized funding. With a change included in the \$1.1 trillion federal spending bill signed into law this week, those fears won't surface again. Like VA medical care accounts, all department benefits will be funded a full year in advance, ensuring that congressional budget fights delays won't disrupt their delivery. Ian de Planque, deputy director of the American Legion's legislative division, said even more important than the legislation that passed may be the new focus from lawmakers on veterans issues. "We're starting to talk to a lot more lawmakers outside the traditional [veterans] committees," he said. "After the problems earlier this year, now this is something that jumped up on their radar." Those

problems — care delays and record-keeping cover-ups at dozens of VA facilities — forced the resignation of former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki and brought dozens of lawmakers into the national debate on how to fix the department's shortfalls. That new knowledge is critical, de Planque said, because VA already has several critical deadlines looming in 2015, including ending the disability benefits backlog and ending veterans homelessness. Success on both those goals will depend on continued pressure from Congress. And Ray Kelley, legislative director of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, noted that there is still a host of advocate-backed legislation that didn't make headway in this session of Congress, either due to legislative gridlock or political distraction.

Veterans groups worked long hours in recent weeks in an attempt to guide the Clay Hunt suicide prevention bill through Congress, but fell short after retiring Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) blocked the measure just days before lawmakers left town. That measure, along with plans for VA construction reform and expanded Gulf War Illness research, is expected to be reintroduced quickly in the new legislative session next month. "We still have a lot of work that didn't get done," Kelley said. "So we're already looking ahead. But VA has been in the national spotlight, so our job now is to keep those issues in the light." The new session of Congress starts Jan. 6. Among the 535 members of the House and Senate are 100 lawmakers with military experience, including 25 who served in Iraq or Afghanistan. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Dec. 22, 2014 ++]

GOP Agenda ► 2015 Wish List

As the holiday season approaches, so does the start of the Republican-run 114th Congress. Here are a few things GOP members have on their wish lists for the new session.

Issue: Sequester Suffocation

- *GOP wish:* The Pentagon's portion of the remaining years of the across-the-board budget cuts, that is. Led by incoming Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) Chairman Sen. John McCain (RAZ) GOP hawks are talking about finally doing something about the evils of the sequester, which they claim is making the US military unprepared for a whole slew of potential fights and missions. McCain says addressing sequestration is the top priority of his SASC reign.

- *Outlook:* If only it were that easy. McCain and Co. are joined in their concerns about the impact the cuts are having on America's fighting force by enough Republicans and Democrats in both chambers to significantly lessen them or get rid of them altogether. That has been the case since they first went into effect. The problem, even with a slim GOP Senate majority, remains: The two parties still disagree on the pieces of a big fiscal deal that would address the defense cuts. House Armed Services Committee (HASC) Chairman-elect Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX) is more clear-eyed, telling CongressWatch this month that the "Armed Services Committee[s] cannot solve that issue." His approach: "Working with others, we're going to do our best to try and solve it." The best-case scenario might be another measure that provides a couple years of relief.

Issue: Acquisition Action

- *GOP wish:* Could 2015 finally be the year of Pentagon acquisition reform? McCain and Thornberry sure hope so. The latter is wrapping a major HASC study on what's broken and how to fix it; the former is zeroing in on measures such as banning cost-plus contracts and building greater accountability into the system. Add in President Barack Obama's defense secretary nominee, former Pentagon acquisition chief Ash Carter, and Republican members say the political moons are aligning in favor of reform.
- *Outlook:* If not next year, when? McCain and Thornberry both want it, Carter is known as a reformer from his time as the military's buying chief and deputy defense secretary, and meaningful changes could help slash costs in the sequestration era. The two veteran lawmakers will lead negotiations on the final version of a 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), the logical legislative vehicle for Pentagon acquisition reform language. Passing reforms would allow McCain to use such a feat in his 2016 re-election campaign, and Carter must think immediately about his legacy with the Obama administration expiring in just two years. In a town where little has gotten done in recent years, a failure to enact something on this issue next year would be a huge setback for the new chairmen — and Carter.

Issue: Tackling Tehran

- *GOP plans:* Young GOP hawks like Arkansas Rep. Tom Cotton, a Foreign Affairs Committee member and senator-elect, believe Iran is slow-walking the Obama administration on talks about its nuclear arms ambitions. Gradually, Cotton said recently, Tehran is “getting everything it wants.” He says Republicans intend to push legislation in the new Congress that would call for more far reaching sanctions against Tehran to punish the regime for not giving up its nuclear arms program. And incoming Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Sen. Bob Corker (R-TN) wants both chambers to vote on any potential deal Washington might strike with Iranian leaders.
- *Outlook:* Cotton envisions Republicans pushing through legislation that would, if Obama provides his signature, enact tougher financial sanctions designed to make it “as hard to conduct financial transactions with the regime as possible.” He says GOP members also want new sanctions that would squeeze Iran’s oil industry. House Intelligence Committee member Rep. Mike Pompeo (RKS) told reporters recently that more muscular sanctions could turn internal public opinion against the Iranian regime. “This is a country that depends on trade for continued stability of regime,” Pompeo said, and with beefier sanctions, “things will look a lot different.”

[Source: Defense News | John T. Bennett | Dec. 16, 2014 ++]